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**An Ideal Woman: Feminism and Performance**

A Thesis Presented

by

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Abstract of the Thesis

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An exploration of theatrical history, theory, and technique is a “triumvirate” that can “determine the value of any performance practice for an enlightened theatre” (Gainor 173). My thesis addresses the question of what it means to be a feminist performer, and overall theatre practitioner. Feminist critiques have often attempted to understand a technique best suited for women to practice theatre that is reflective of feminist ideals. My thesis begins by exploring specific examples of female representation in theatre and in society. It covers the patriarchal structure of society, the opinions held about women and their position, and their categorization into inferiority, as displayed in Ancient Greece, the English Renaissance, and English Restoration. Furthermore, it reflects on the feminist critiques and theories regarding male gaze and gender performativity as aspects of domineering patriarchal control. My thesis then discusses the criticisms of acting techniques, influenced by the Feminist Movement in the United States, and an analysis of existing acting techniques and how women can use them to approach a role. Finally, I reflect upon my direction of a play adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, originally by Oscar Wilde, and how I used my research to potentially alter the misogynistic aspects of the play. Overall, my thesis aims to inform and enlighten theatre practitioners who desire to incorporate feminist critique and theory into their work.

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## Introduction

One of the most satirical plays of the twentieth century, *An Ideal Husband* by Oscar Wilde, questions what it means to be an ideal man and an ideal woman in the modern Victorian Age, and contains several sardonic lines about the role of each in society. The Leading male character, Lord Goring declares, “A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. A woman's life revolves in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses. Don't make any terrible mistake, Lady Chiltern. A woman who can keep a man's love, and love him in return, has done all the world wants of women, or should want of them” (4.246). This speech, later parroted by Lady Chiltern, while seen as comedic resolution, also holds a mocking mirror to not only the society Oscar Wilde lived in, but a long withstanding culture dominated by patriarchal structure. While able to satirize his society, Wilde had no feminist thinkers or theatre practitioners to instruct the process of representing women on stage. He instead leaned on epigrams and paradoxes in his work in order to display and ridicule the bourgeois morality. In his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, written in 1890, Wilde's objectification of women dissolves from humorous mockery, to disturbing violence. His female characters experience the harsh consequences of aestheticizing women. Whether by intentional design, or a subconscious reflection of his society, Wilde inspires conversation about the representation of women, and the misogynistic gender constructs. While the novel wasn't intended for the stage (though the majority of Wilde's works were), an adaptation of it by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa encompasses the major themes and advances the conversation to include how theatre performance can impact society. I directed a production of this play at Stony Brook University with undergraduate students, and sought to turn what potentially could be classified as a sexist play (with Aguirre-Sacasa's inclusion of graphic violence against women), into a feminist critique about performance embodied on stage. I hoped to apply an understanding of feminist theory as it relates to performance, in order to alter the patriarchal elements within a play. In my pursuit, I questioned what constitutes the representation of women, and what it means to be a feminist performer. My research reflected upon the historical precedents to Wilde, such as ancient Greek, English Renaissance and Restoration theatre practices, usefully critiqued by feminist thinkers. My research aims to enlighten my directorial process, reflects on the use of semiotics and negotiation of the meaning of plays

through a combination of acting methods to encourage a feminist approach to performance among my actors. Furthermore, it aims to enlighten the reader as to what it means to be a feminist performer. It seeks to raise the consciousness of women and men in the arts, by analyzing history, theory, and technique – a “triumvirate” that can “determine the value of any performance practice for an enlightened theatre” (Gainor 173).

## Section 1: The Creation of “Woman”, Male-gaze, and Gender Performativity

Before exploring the forbearers of Wilde, one must understand the impact of theatre and society and the meaning of representation of women on stage. A foundation of theatre is its didactic nature, its ability to teach. Aristotle described that theatre incorporates mimesis, or imitation and representation of humankind. If theatre serves to represent certain “truths” about society, it can be argued that theatre can also serve as a “great school of practical wisdom, a guide to civil life, and a key to the mind” (Schiller 252). Women’s place in society was established almost as far back as when Western theatre began in ancient Greece. Early societal developments initiated the idea of the public sphere (public interactions, education, business, and politics) versus the private sphere (the individual, the family and the home). In Sue-Ellen Case’s influential book *Feminism and Theatre*, she reflects on the historical representation of women, beginning with the perception that the division of public life and private life is gender specific. Men dominated the public sphere, while women were suppressed to the private sphere. Misogynistic attitudes dominated the culture, viewing women as inferior, having dangerous intentions, and prone to flirtatious behavior.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of this division and cultural attitude, female representation in the arts reflected a patriarchal view or rather, subordination of women. Case cites the feminist approach to this as the creation of “Woman” – “a male-produced fiction...representing the patriarchal values attached to the gender while suppressing the experiences, stories, feelings and fantasies of actual women” (7). Furthermore, men in drag who portrayed “Women” as actual women were not allowed on stage, due to the exclusion of women from all public life.<sup>2</sup> Changes occurred in the socio-economic faction of Greek culture, where a sharp distinction was made between the *oikos* (household) and the *polis* (political space). Responsibilities ascribed to each arena changed, and were defined by masculine or feminine duties. This polarity made “Woman” appear as the opposite of man, and made their role in society almost invisible. Therefore, with the rise of drama and festivals to Dionysus (the Greek god of wine, fertility, and theatre), the practice of mimesis grew, allowing men, through gesture, movement, and intonation, to represent gender as they saw fit. With women absent from the public sphere, appropriating gender behavior was subject to generalization and the male point of view of female experience.



Naturally, the Greek tragedies and comedies that emerged were usually written by male playwrights, for male audiences. Women characters were included (often times in the title of the play), and were often seen challenging men and politics. However, in such plays as *Lysistrata*, *Antigone*, and *Medea*, female resistance to society was not seen as strong, but rather sought to instruct women on their role in society, as “it is always clear in the drama, that these are not foreign women acting normally, but Athenian women acting abnormally” (Shaw 256). Misogynistic views, backed up by theocratic law prevented female expression from entering the public space. The infringement on women’s rights continued as theatre developed into Europe and similar to the Greeks, principles of female inferiority, supported by religious doctrine, reigned dominant. While early theatrical practices such as masques, guild plays, and even Eastern Kabuki theatre, allowed women to participate, they were once again banned from the stage when performance became a profession. Scholarly texts on this historical period offer a range of explanations for this exclusion. From women’s voices not being strong enough to project in theatrical arenas, to the immoral sexual conduct that would inevitably occur if women were allowed on stage.<sup>3</sup> Case claims these “explanations” were an added dimension of female oppression. Developed from widespread Christian beliefs, “the female body had become the site for sexuality. If women performed in the public arena, the sexuality inscribed upon their bodies would elicit immoral sexual responses from men, bringing disorder to the social body” (20). This continuing wedge that was being driven through the genders, not only banished women from performing, but also perpetuated the absence of female voices in literature, politics, philosophy, and education. Women were culturally cut-off, with no representation in society, and no opportunity to learn about their society without a male-constructed model. Therefore, the women portrayed in theatre continued to reflect the idea of “Woman”, only now the male-imagined characteristics they were embedded with, were the characteristics that made them sexually dangerous. Case provides a great example of this by quoting William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, where Rosalind (as Ganymede) tells Orlando how she taught a man how to court a woman:

He was to imagine me his love, his mistress: and I set him every day to woo me.

At which time would I, being but a moonish youth, grieve, be effeminate, changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full of tears, full of smiles; for every passion something and for no passion truly anything (III.ii.378-89).

While Case goes on to explore the male homoeroticism of young boys playing women, this section of text from Shakespeare's play exemplifies the generalization and suppression of women by citing their shared, unwavering and inferior characteristics.

However, the language of plays written by Shakespeare and other English Renaissance writers was not solely responsible for society's view of woman. By having boy actors play female roles, the depiction of female behavior, through gesture and movement was subject to biased male interpretation and mockery. Case calls it "the fiction of the female gender" (27), and further notes that while women weren't allowed on stage, they were allowed in the audience. Unlike ancient Greek audiences, men and women could share in their observation of the female gender, and Case questions what conclusions these women might have come to about their own sexuality and gender after viewing. What does the cultural construction of gender differences imply? If all women share these subordinate characteristics, almost as if the gender is mass-produced, then women become a predictable object that can be owned and controlled. Unsurprisingly, modern feminist critics share the idea that this representation implied that "Woman" is an object, and her role in society is to be exchanged by men.<sup>4</sup>

In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, female players began to emerge in Italy and France, and their performances on stage influenced the banished King Charles II. When he was restored to the English throne in 1660, Charles II re-established the theatres and officially allowed women a place on the English stage. Although not immediately, allowing women on stage undeniably opened the doors for female influence on the arts and on the perception of their sex to others in society. As Ellen Donkin discusses in her essay on Sarah Siddons, one of the most famous early female English actors, "the history of women's performance is the history of a struggle for a subject, rather than an object, position in representation" (317). Donkin reflects on this shift as not just a change for theatre, but as society as a whole. Women were allowed to occupy public space, and therefore occupied the "public imagination." However, it was not a shift without conditions. Women were allowed to occupy space on stage, but strictly as an object of desire or ridicule. Donkin assesses that while a woman might have opinions of the world she lived in, or even of the world of the play, she was limited to the stereotypes assigned to female behavior. Some actresses, such as Nell Gwyn began their careers as prostitutes, making the two areas of work intrinsically related by carnal desire. Actresses had limited artistic freedom; in order to continue working, adhering to male playwrights' and male directors' ideologies of women was

necessary. Donkin also categorizes the atmosphere of eighteenth-century audiences as a “shouting” audience, a term borrowed from African-American culture, wherein theatregoers voiced their approval or disapproval as they viewed live theatre (a practice rarely seen today in professional theatre). With a woman’s limited opportunity at artistic interpretation, and the sanctioning of an audience to express its dissatisfaction with any deviation from male-inscribed status quo, theorists have come to know this structure as “male gaze,” the notion that the central lens through which we view culture is male.

While her essay focuses on the male-dominated Hollywood culture of 1975, Laura Mulvey is additionally able to reflect upon the history of women in theatre, proposing that women are the objects, rather than the possessors of gaze, because the control of the “camera” derives from heterosexual men as the assumed target audience. Citing psychoanalytic theory (such as Jacques Lacan’s expansion on Freud’s phallogocentric theories and semiotics) as a “political weapon,” Mulvey reflects on the way our society since Freud has been structured. Mulvey gives credit to Freud’s categorization of women as the “male other” and symbol of castration (a fear-inducing idea). This inspires a voyeuristic approach toward women, gazing at the “other” as objects that must be controlled. From this, Mulvey attributes the representation of women in film to the “sexing of the female” and as always being “tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (7). Mulvey cites Alfred Hitchcock’s films (most extensively *Rear Window*) as examples of restricted female representation – as “erotic exhibitionism” and only ever contributing to the “illusionistic narrative” (14). While Mulvey posits that this concept is specific to film, charging the camera as a mechanism of male gaze, the concept has been used in analyzing past and present theatre practices, as well as the content of plays and theatrical performances.

William Shakespeare’s plays are a fitting example. Without the consideration of modern adaptations, in most of Shakespeare’s comedies, we can expect certain structural elements that are consistent with the foundational ideas of male gaze: a plot designed around a young woman who is “ripe for marriage,” the presence of clowns or fools, sexuality, song and/or dance, a scapegoat or outsider to explain coincidental plot points, all ending in the marriage or courtship for the young female protagonist (Gay 4). These comedies suggest that the ultimate triumph for a woman is to end her story in a marriage – one of the most powerful symbols of the “regulated social order of patriarchy”(3). Penny Gay’s book *As She Likes It*, reflects upon Mulvey’s idea of

male gaze as it relates to “unruly women”: female characters (see Rosalind, Beatrice) who attempt to escape the restrictions on their gender, by either cross-dressing, or asserting a dominating feature of wit or intelligence, beyond the “normal decorum of her gender.” Gay focuses primarily on comedic female characters that almost all meet the fate of marriage and wifehood (always returning to the prescribed private sphere). Unmentioned are Shakespeare’s tragic female characters, exhibiting such unruly behavior as disobeying their fathers, or aligning themselves with male ambition (see Juliet, Lady Macbeth), whose fate usually ends in death. In the majority of instances then, Shakespeare displayed a form of male gaze: Women who deviate from the male ideal of “Woman” must either be incorporated back into the patriarchal social structure (by means of marriage), or they must be eliminated from the narrative. As mentioned in numerous feminist works<sup>5</sup>, these narratives served as a lesson for the audience, reinforcing women’s place below men in the hierarchy.

For many theorists, male gaze can also be applied to other forms of entertainment such as advertisements and visual art, another form of creating meaning about what it is to be a woman. In *The Media and Body Image*, Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunter argue the dangerous implications of male gaze by referencing John Berger’s “Ways of Seeing”, a 4-part television series dedicated to exploring the hidden ideologies in visual images, specifically those of the female body. They reflect that, “for Berger these images record the inequality of gender relations and a sexualization of the female image that remains culturally central today. They reassure men of their sexual power and at the same moment deny any sexuality of women other than the male construction” (38-39). Wykes and Gunter mirror the argument of historians and theorists that the woman is then the object, constructed through visual images as a product to be bought or sold. Furthermore, the continuation of such representation could be considered a contributor to the male attitude of entitlement to women’s bodies and rape culture. Wykes and Gunter charge male gaze with the creation of the marketing motto “sex sells” and state that even advertisements aimed at women are not exempt from its influence. Once again, Case’s question proves relevant: what conclusions can women come to about their own gender in a world full of male-constructed ideals? How do we, men and women alike, know when we adhere to our “ideal” gender norms? Furthermore, how would I approach these questions in the rehearsal process, where I pushed my actors to characterize their roles beyond the caricature of gender that was displayed in the script?

As perhaps an attempt to answer what or who dictates our behavior (and whether it's categorized as feminine or masculine), many of the aforementioned theorists and feminist critics reference Judith Butler's work on gender. Butler began by looking at the definition of "woman," citing the work Jacques Lacan seeking to disjoin biological sex and gender identity. She agrees with the arguments of women before her: that we cannot see women as a "homogenous unified group" since every woman is a unique individual (519). While attempting to understand what seems to be intrinsic feminine behavior versus masculine behavior, Butler offers a different outlook. She argues that gender specific behavior is not natural, not rooted in our biological makeup, rather an effect of heteronormative society. Heteronormativity, and compulsory heterosexuality<sup>6</sup>, while encompassing many facets of sexuality and society, describes how gender and sexuality are organized into identity by hierarchical binaries: man as the opposite and superior of woman. It describes the discourse that has dominated social institutions throughout almost all of history, and adds further support to arguments made by feminist critics in theatre. In addition to acknowledging the heteronormative script that rules our actions, Butler concludes then that gender is performative.

Our gender stems from a repetitive performance of "imitated dominant gender conventions" as a way to construct and perform an identity (530). If we are to believe Butler's conclusion, Case's reflection on "the fiction of the female gender," now becomes the fiction of gender as a whole, including the male. How we behave (as an expression of identity) is more of a reflection of heterosexual and patriarchal standards of society than it is of our own individuality. As recompense, Butler offers the notion that gender can be subverted, citing *drag* as a main example. However, in later interviews, Butler clarifies performing gender is not as simple or as volitional as "look[ing] in my closet and decide[ing] which gender I want to be today...stylize[ing] it, and then that evening...change it again and be something radically other" (Kotz 83). Butler reforms her argument to "refute the reduction of gender performance to something like style" and insists that gender performativity is really about the "repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms" (Kotz 84). While some assert that Butler doesn't offer concrete gender subversion techniques, she does clarify that gender shouldn't be treated as an object, as a commodification or "kind of consumerism" – a suggestion that also encompasses our view and subsequent treatment of women.

Furthermore, Butler states that the enactment of gender norms has real consequences. While we may believe our behavior to be subjective to our own independent responses to environmental stimuli, Butler contends that “gender is a corporeal style,” and that such a style has no relation to “essential truths about the body” – it is purely ideological (523). She draws a compelling metaphor to theatre to further explain:

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again...gender cannot be understood as a *role* which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,' whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority (521, 528).

Butler's work became important in the rehearsal process of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, during specified acting rehearsals. I noticed my actors playing with generalizations about their character in regard to gender, only working with simple definitions of who their character was (ex. “the womanizer,” “the gay artist,” “the naive girl next door,” “the slut,” etc.) They were acting out a style, as Butler describes and performing a subsection of their gender. While beginning to understand the impact of representation, I urged them to explore Butler's work and be aware of gender performativity- when it could work within moments in the play, and when to drop the act, without dropping the character. I informed my actors, some of whom had limited acting experience, that much like in reality, we sometimes perform how society has labeled us - but that doesn't diminish our unique identity, and by acknowledging Butler's work, we can potentially differentiate between performativity and identity. In a similar vein, they could approach their characters in that way. For example, while the character, Alan Campbell has moments of being a womanizer, he drops the act when someone questions his sexuality. In addition, the character of Victoria Frost, while her comments are often cold and cutting, she displays motherly affection and concern in times of need. Butler was instrumental in helping my actors distinguish the many layers and complexities of their characters.

Reflecting upon the historical position of women in society, and the how theatre lends itself to male gaze and gender performativity, one questions how women should approach roles. Women were instructed how to behave through the content of plays, while men look on from their position of superiority. From didactic plays in ancient Greece, a multitude of religious and biological reasons for women to be kept off stage during the English Renaissance, and the embodiment of women merely as objects during the Restoration, female suppression on and off stage has offered feminist critics a lot of material to analyze. With an understanding of some of the historical practices, and feminist thought that dissects the structure of these practices, we can perhaps begin to approach the topic of performance, specifically how actresses approach a role.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Michael Shaw's "The Female Intruder: Women in Fifth-Century Drama", *Classical Philology* 70 4 (1975), pg. 256-70 for more on male opinion toward female intention.

<sup>2</sup> See Margerete Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theatre* for the development of this segregation, pg. 9, as quoted in Case's *Feminism and Theatre*.

<sup>3</sup> See Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages*, vol. 1 for further explanations as to why women were not suited for the stage, pg. 252.

<sup>4</sup> Case (in *Feminism and Theatre*, pg. 26) quotes and discusses Luce Irigaray, "When the Goods Get Together" in *New French Feminisms* (1981), pg. 107.

<sup>5</sup> See Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia", and Theresa D. Kemp, *Women in the Age of Shakespeare* for their incorporation of male gaze when analyzing female roles in theatre.

<sup>6</sup> See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", *Journal of Women's History* 15 3 (1980): 11-48 for her explanation of heterosexuality as assumed and enforced, particularly for females, in a patriarchal society.

## Section 2: An Actress Performs

The previous section explored specific historical practices and their subsequent feminist critiques, in order to better understand the position of women in society in relation to the development of theatre. Furthermore, it aimed to investigate the theory of male gaze and gender performativity and begin to apply it to the practice of theatre, specifically in my direction of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The next step to my research is to explore feminist performance theory, and address the opposing views on how women should or should not approach a role, according to feminist thought.

While eighteenth-century English theatre allowed women on stage, it wasn't until 1899 that Mary Shaw, an American actress, wrote about the "notion of a female subject" (Donkin 317). She reflected that female roles "talk and act not as real women would, but as men think that women ought to talk and act" (318). She suggested that there was a need for a different kind of drama, one that included "believable women characters in believable circumstances." The notion of "Woman" was ever present, as actresses portrayed the cultural expectations of their sex, and experienced a "circling back" of those expectations on themselves. With no autonomy from their roles, women sought a disruption to the seemingly closed system. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols as elements of communication, could be applied to theatre: the performance and text can form two different signs to an audience, with the text of a play not deemed as "truer" than the actions of actors on the stage, began to have bearing on women's performances.<sup>1</sup> Donkin writes that gifted actresses of the eighteenth century found ways to "perform powerfully" within texts that reflected male point of views (319). She discusses the structure of scripts, which usually allowed for at least one scene, where the female lead made her "hits", moments where an actress could "explode into a vitality and power that were absent from the rest of her role." She extensively discusses one performance by popular actress, Sarah Siddons, in her role as Mrs. Beverley in *The Gamester* written by James Shirley in 1633. Audiences greeted her entrance onto the stage with hostility (shouting "Off! Off!"), not as a response to her character in the play, but to her as an actress, due to rumors concerning her off-stage conduct. Donkin cites live accounts of the performance, specifically when Siddons approached her "hit" section of the play, and "stepped outside of both character and dramatic narrative, turned in righteous anger, and looked back at her audience" (326). This gesture, Donkin concludes, forced the audience to deal with her, "not as object but as speaking subject", and shifted the gaze, even if just for a moment.



She compares moments like these as a form of voyeurism for the audience, and while they weren't open to seeing "unpredictable and powerful" behavior by actual women, the scenes resonated and offered "a glimpse of the power inside" (319)

While some women, like Ms. Siddons, were able to influence early theatrical practice, it was the second-wave feminist movement in America in the 1960s-70s that spurred a drastic shift in the power structure, and began an exploration into women's issues in performance. Many different feminist positions emerged as a result of the political movement and charged all systems of society as being dominated by male influence. As a facet of radical feminism<sup>2</sup>, "consciousness-raising (or CR) groups" were formed, and led to the creation of one of the earliest feminist theatre groups: It's All Right To Be Woman Theatre. The group focused exclusively on the experiences of women, using CR techniques, such as group therapy, fundraising and advocacy, to provide women with a voice. By sharing experiences and identifying instances of female subordination, the CR groups could assess needs, establish goals, provide outreach services and work toward social change. In the theatre world, plays written by, directed by, and performed by women emerged and were used by feminist activists, intellectuals, and artists as a joint effort to liberate women and deconstruct the fiction of the female gender. This work helped change perceptions, attitudes and beliefs and drive society in a pro-feminist direction.

An important player in this goal was performance technique. At the time of the feminist movement, acting techniques had been formed, practiced, introduced and re-worked by teachers and renowned theatre practitioners. Starting with Aristotle's *Poetics* (in which women are put in the same social class as slaves, and instructed that women should not exhibit "the intellectual cleverness that is associated with men" [lines 54a9-12]), women's education in *how* to act relied heavily on techniques designed by men. In *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, Case compiles the works of feminist theorists, critics, and artists arguing for the urgent necessity of an acting technique that can be deemed suitable of reflecting "the feminist combination of personal and political" (93). Most of these works rejected the work of Konstantin Stanislavski and those he influenced in America, lumping his work with Lee Strasberg's Method acting. Stanislavski's system involves the use of emotional memory, psychological analysis and physical expression as an approach to character development. Sections of his system include understanding the given circumstances of a narrative, responding to outside stimuli with magic

“if”, and the discovery and exploration of a character’s motives and objectives. Stanislavski’s work influenced theatre artists internationally, leading to the development of more performance theories, including that of Lee Strasberg and his Method. Case and her colleagues present a collective suggestion for women to withdraw from such conventional theatre; however, they do so with a narrow understanding of acting theories, their development, and little consideration towards women already working in the theatre. Case quotes Butler’s work on gender performativity and aligns universal behavior with Stanislavski’s “psychological construction of character” (122), stating that his technique is designed to keep the female actor and her representation on stage oppressed. She criticizes his system, arguing that the approach is subjective and grounded in patriarchal ideals, and its use lacks intelligent discourse. Without ever citing Stanislavski or Strasberg, Case asserts that the logical next step is to reject the acting technique as a whole.

As influenced by Case’s argument against Stanislavski, some second and third-wave feminist scholars suggested the use of Bertolt Brecht’s Epic style and alienation effect in theatre as a viable technique for hopeful feminist theatre practitioners. Among them, Elin Diamond, who in *Unmaking Mimesis* advocates for the use of Brechtian *gestus*, a method of conveying “an attitude or single aspect of attitude” and is “expressible in words or actions” (Brecht 42) as a “stage sign...that reveals historical reasons – the personal/social contradictions implied by the play’s fable” (Diamond 145). Furthermore, she reflects on “*Verfremdungseffekt*” or Alienation effect, a technique meant to distance the audience emotionally from the characters and action on stage, in order to achieve an intellectual understanding. Actors would break the fourth wall by directly addressing the audience, and realistic representational acting was not allowed. Furthermore, Brecht wanted his theatre to inspire social change, a notion certainly attractive to the continuing feminist movement. Diamond states that Brecht’s technique could be used to “expose or mock the strictures of gender, to reveal gender-as-appearance, as the effect, not the precondition” and that by alienating gender, “the ideology of gender is exposed and thrown back at the spectator” (46). Therefore, actresses could comment on the roles they were playing within their performances. Feminist theatre scholars determined that Brecht was a performance theorist they could align their movement with, strongly urging him as an alternative to Stanislavski and the Method, creating a “performance binary” (Gainor 165) - two distinct and disconnected forms of acting.

In *Rethinking Feminism, Stanislavsky, and Performance* (2002), J. Ellen Gainor analyzes the contradictory elements of feminist theorists' work, and aims to qualify some of the arguments made against the traditional acting methods. She focuses on the work of influential feminist critics such as Sue-Ellen Case, Elaine Aston<sup>3</sup>, and Sharon Carnicke.<sup>4</sup> Gainor criticizes these women, among others, for their arguments against Stanislavski and the Method, pointing out the contradictory elements in their respective works. Specifically, Case, Aston and Carnicke support a Brechtian approach to performance, and pit his theories against the practices of Stanislavski and Strasberg. Brecht put political commentary at the forefront of performance, which appealed to the feminist cause. However, Gainor argues that it doesn't mean that Stanislavski is fundamentally at odds with feminist theory, as some would assert. Gainor highlights the contradictory statements in their works, and refutes the idea that actresses should only play the political and social analysis of a character. She suggests that their work simplifies and diminishes the process of acting, by limiting the viable techniques available to feminist performers.

Gainor references work like Case, Aston and Carnicke to demonstrate the fervent dismissal of Stanislavski's techniques, and tries to account for the "application of the Stanislavsky/Brecht performance binary within feminist theatre criticism" (165). Gainor states that over the course of the twentieth century, we developed an increasingly narrow understanding of Stanislavski's theories and the application of those theories contributed to feminist criticism. Without refuting the potential benefit of a Brechtian approach in feminist theatre practice, she encourages her colleagues to reexamine their dismissal of Stanislavski and the Method. She begins by describing the triangular structure of theatre groups in America, made popular by the Actors Studio as a "synergistic environment...Playwrights wrote for actors trained in Method techniques. Directors staged their scripts using the Studio actors" (167). She cites a series of interviews with female members of the Group Theatre (later associated with Lee Strasberg and the Actors Studio), in which they recall the male-dominated climate, the troubling treatment they experienced, and the invisibility they felt even as members of the troupe. However, they expressed a belief in the Method, "not the elements of the technique that [she] felt were imposed on her, but those that she believed were viable for her as a woman actor" (166).

The issues were more associated with Strasberg (simultaneously known as the father of Method acting, and "particularly disabling to women" [Donkin & Clement 4]), rather than the

acting technique, itself. Strasberg drew on Stanislavski's early work, focusing primarily on building internal stimuli (affective memory, sensory recall) in order to act "truthfully", asking actors to substitute a character's circumstances with their own. Even as Strasberg urged that his technique was "rooted in ideas of free will", it was said that "free will" was curtailed in the Method classroom (Krasner 13). Students testify that his patriarchal presence and strict teaching structure led to emotional abuse, particularly for the women. Furthermore, "the Method mirrored America's obsession with the Freudian model of the mind by employing therapeutic techniques meant to free the inhibited actor" (Carnicke in Gainor 170). As previously discussed by Mulvey and Butler, Freud's theories conflicted with those of the feminist movement, and the combination of this, an oversimplification of Stanislavski's system, and Strasberg's reputation, contributed to the aforementioned performance binary. Moreover, the works that perpetuated the performance binary in attempting to instruct feminist artists, limited them. Pushing towards one technique puts women in a confined box where they are told one behavior is right and the other is wrong, a reflection of the patriarchal need to control women, rather than of feminist thought. Gainor concludes that a different approach toward performance theory is needed if we are to attempt to incorporate feminist practices into theatre. She praises the work of peers who incorporate commentary on acting practice by female artists at work, and encourages artists (non-gender specific) to engage with history and feminist theory in order to strengthen their creative techniques.

Following Gainor's insight, Rhonda Blair engages with developments in cognitive neuroscience and neurophysiology to reassess Stanislavski's system in *Reconsidering Stanislavsky: Feeling, Feminism, and the Actor*. Blair wants feminists to continue to explore skepticism about conventional theatre practices and narrative, but also to reconsider ideas of the "body, narrative, and consciousness in relationship to the performer's process" (179). In his later methods, she states:

Stanislavsky manipulates principles of action, behavior, imagination, attention, emotion, and memory to help the actor reach what he called the 'inner creative state', allowing the actor to engage the work intellectually, physically, and emotionally...this approach emphasizes an actor-character (or a 'self') in relationship to an environment (a range of internal and external objects) and is in line with recent views in neuroscience about how body, brain, consciousness,

emotion, memory, and behavior are related. (181)

Using neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio's work on consciousness, Blair convincingly overrides anti-Stanislovski feminist work, confirming that emotions are a biological process, not a psychological one, and therefore cannot be regulated by culture. Carefully distinguishing between feeling and emotion, she describes Damasio's assertion that feelings are a conscious evaluation of emotion – furthermore explaining that acknowledgement of this process, “the feeling of knowing that we have feeling,” can lead to “planned and non stereotypical responses” (Damasio 285 qtd. in Blair). She also reflects on the idea of an “autobiographical self...composed of a ‘lived past and anticipated future’ emerging from the ‘gradual buildup of memories’ (Damasio 196)”, which allows us to adjust our behavior in real (or imagined) situations in order to maintain homeostasis. She connects this with Stanislavski's system, where an actor ideally involves both “core and extended consciousness, interrelates conscious elements of history, memory, and given circumstances to unlock imagination and respond ‘in the moment’” (188). Blair's validations of Stanislavski's system serve to refocus feminist theorists – those who would challenge the use of feeling and narrative as being “predominantly social and psychological phenomena” (189), are encouraged to have a more organic engagement with their mind and body when approaching acting.

Perhaps as a response to the need for a feminist perspective of existing techniques, Rosemary Malague in her recent book, *An Actress Prepares: Women and “the Method,”* collects and analyzes the work of the four main teachers of American acting: Lee Strasberg, Uta Hagen, Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner, all of whom derived their theories from Stanislavski. Acknowledging the analyses of prior feminist theatre scholars, Malague dedicates a chapter to each teacher, providing ample background information, examining the practice and implication of each theory, and including her own personal experience with each. Furthermore, she urges instructors in conservatory and university acting programs to assess their own pedagogical practice, warning against students' reliance on a teacher, rather than the technique.

Continuing to address the limiting theatrical practices of second and third-wave feminists, specifically the opposition to performing male playwrights' work, is an important piece to this study. Aspiring feminist performers (or perhaps, just theatre practitioners), will undoubtedly encounter opportunities to perform in works by August Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen, and many many more influential male playwrights. We are told that such works create “a prisonhouse of

art” for women (Case 124), and that is not without merit. In such plays as *Miss Julie* or *Hedda Gabler*, the women function as objects to the male-identified subject, reinforcing the divide of power among the genders. However, through the use of semiotics, approaching the text through a feminist lens and negotiating meaning through motivation and experience, one could maintain the political and historical efficacy of a script, and have the performance judged independently. For example, Helena Faucit’s reflection on her characterization of Ophelia in *Hamlet*, wherein she devised a childhood for Ophelia, based on given circumstances (Faucit 9-11). The resulting performance was one in which Ophelia was more self-aware of her trajectory as an object of male affection. Furthermore, adaptations can be constructed and women can play famous male roles. For instance, a Mabou Mines production of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, in which a woman played Lear, therefore changing the gender hierarchy, and commenting on the interrelations between power and love within women (Ferris 101). Through feminist readings and adaptations of classical texts, meaning of female roles can be altered to reflect a more complete representation of women that aligns with feminist ideals. Granted, several more factors contribute to controlling the meaning: concepts would have to be shared by the director, actors, and designers, with all facets working cooperatively towards the same goal.

While feminist critique on performance theory initially steered toward Brecht, arguments for Stanislavski-based techniques have led to new interpretations and practices of acting. Research like Blair’s, which incorporates cognitive neuroscience with performance theory, is becoming increasingly popular among respected theatre scholars, and there is a growing emphasis on embodied acting.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, different techniques have been broken apart and meshed together to form new approaches, such as Viewpoints<sup>6</sup>, a form of training for actors, which combines improvisation, spatial relationships, gesture and responses. Exploring the nature of the debate about representation and process was vital to my own understanding of performance and led to informed directorial decisions.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Susan Bassnet-McGuire, “An Introduction to Theatre Semiotics”, *Theatre Quarterly* 10 (1980), pg. 47-53

<sup>2</sup> Case (*in Feminism and Theatre*) makes a distinction between radical feminism, which calls for a reordering of society, by eliminating male supremacy from all social and economical contexts, and materialist feminism, which centers on social change toward Marxism (highlighting capitalism and patriarchy as central to women's oppression).

<sup>3</sup> See Elaine Aston's *Feminist Theatre Practice*.

<sup>4</sup> See Sharon Carnicke's *Stanislavsky in Focus*.

<sup>5</sup> See Rick Kemp's *Embodied Acting: What Neuroscience Tells Us About Performance* and Rhonda Blair and Amy Cook's *Theatre, Performance and Cognition: Languages, Bodies and Ecologies*.

<sup>6</sup> See Anne Bogart and Tina Landau's *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*.

### Section 3: Approaches in Rehearsal and Impact on Stage

Although practicing theatre through a feminist lens requires a mastery of feminist history and theory, as well as a mastery of existing acting techniques, I attempted to incorporate my research into my direction of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, adapted from the novel by Oscar Wilde. As a director, it was my job to form and explain my directorial concept, and make sure all aspects of the production adhere to it. Due to the nature of the play, I promoted cast bonding, and led discussions about the sensitive material and how it should be respected. I held separate rehearsals specifically to discuss my concepts, my research regarding feminist theory and how we could use acting techniques to approach scenes. Impacted by my research, I felt it was vital to approach scenes with an understanding of their severity, not only in the world of the play, but also in our society. I wanted to take the misogynistic or sexist aspects of the play and critique them through a combination of acting techniques.

While the novel has certain gruesome elements, Aguirre-Sacasa's adaptation is significantly more visually disturbing. In addition, Aguirre-Sacasa incorporates direct lines from the novel with language of our modern world, such as demeaning terms for women. While very much a male-centric story, a major plot point is Dorian's interaction with women. The novel does not develop the female characters much, instead they serve to move the plot forward through the story of the three male characters: Dorian Gray, Henry Wotton, and Basil Hallward. The novel truly centers on the trajectory of these men. However, the adaptation gives more attention to the women - with moments of domestic abuse, belittlement, and staged violence against women. The script contains several instances of verbal and physical abuse, and the treatment of women as dispensable objects. A key part of presenting these scenes was distinguishing between critique and a simple repetition of violent patterns. My actors and I did initial dramaturgical research: we considered statistics across the world, patterns of behavior among abusers, stories of survivors, historical context, and even shared our own experiences. We analyzed the script, separating the scenes into moments, marking the shifts into abusive behavior. One moment in particular, is a scene with Dorian and a female character, Christina. The scene begins with playful banter, both characters reflecting on their six day long sexual excursion. When Christina informs Dorian that she has to leave, there is a shift in the dynamic of their relationship. The nature of the conversation takes a turn from flirtatious quipping to life threatening as Dorian states how easy it would be for him to rape her, kill her, and "mutilate



[her] body beyond recognition” (38). It is a moment that shocks the reader and the audience, and I wanted to illustrate that the shift was not something to dismiss or accept. I instructed the actress playing Christina to let the line sit in the air for a few seconds, giving herself and the audience to digest what had just been said. Through extensive discussion, I informed the actress that by letting that line sit and sink in, she could be a reflection of the audience, or of women in today’s society. Her portrayal of disbelief, disgust, and then subsequently storming out could reflect how inappropriate Dorian’s comment was, and how people should regard such treatment of women. During the performance, the pause allowed for audience members hear each other audibly gasp, and then begin rooting for Christina, as she attempted to remove herself from Dorian’s grasp.

Most of the exercises done in rehearsal reflected a Stanislavskian approach to character development (finding the given circumstances, objectives and motivation, using the magic “if”). However, I shared my research regarding Brechtian techniques, and asked them to try to alienate themselves from the text in the scenes with violent images. Following a series of exercises and an amateur employment of Brecht’s technique, we assessed that a combination of these techniques contributed to a deeper understanding of the scene’s implications, and stronger “hits” in the trajectory of the scene. The actors were instructed to forego any identification with their characters in these moments, and reflect and represent the thoughts of the audience, or on a grander scale, society. In addition to the Christina scene, an example of this is a particular moment with the character of Sibyl Vane, an actress and Dorian Gray’s fiancé. Upon her suicide (which Aguirre-Sacasa gruesomely adapts from death by poison, to Sibyl jumping in front of a train), Dorian and his friend, Harry categorize her death as beautiful, marvelous, romantic, and pronounce that by committing suicide she “...lived her finest tragedy. She transcended this sphere and became art” (32). In the second act, the ghost of Sibyl appears to Dorian, and mirrors his comments about her death. Aguirre-Sacasa’s script leaves plenty of room for subtext, and at a first glance, Sibyl’s reappearance is just that – the same, unchanged character once more playing out a scene in Dorian’s life. The actress that was playing Sibyl was viewing the scene as a continuation of her portrayal of Sibyl. However, upon script analysis, we determined that we could turn the words into a mockery of Dorian and his ideals surrounding Sibyl’s death. A shift in her tone (from comforting to accusatory) and the use of gesture (staring back toward the audience) could change the meaning of her words, and potentially reflect the feminist theory that female suicide should never be romanticized or sexualized.<sup>1</sup> It was meant to put the audience on

trial - for those who had perhaps subconsciously accepted that Sibyl's death was artistic and a beautiful sentiment of love. The script required her appearance to be shocking and disturbing to look at - a dress covered in blood - and in a similar vein, I wanted her speech to make the audience uncomfortable about their own perceptions. I strived to leave the audience with some of the same discomfort and guilt that Dorian had, and received feedback from several people that pointed it out as a pivotal moment in the play that caused them to reflect on their own interpretations.

Incorporating different acting techniques and discussing feminist critique was a vital piece in my directorial process. Whether or not I succeeded in changing the audience's perception of the play, and commenting on the way the script represents women is subjective. However, my attempts led to valuable conversations among my cast and audience members. We held a talkback, a post show discussion where cast, crew and audience members were able to ask questions about my concepts and their interpretations. It sparked a conversation about the representation of women in theatre, film, and other facets of entertainment. My actors were able to contribute knowledgeably to the conversation, having absorbed the ideas I shared with them, and forming their own understanding of it. It was moments like these – being conscious of the implications of my work, striving to incorporate feminist theory as I practice theatre, and the noticeable influence I had on the people I worked with – that made this project valuable to me, and worthy of discussion.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Magda Romanska, "Ontology and Eroticism: Two Bodies of Ophelia", *Women's Studies* 34 6 (2005), pg. 485-513 for her work on women as art.

## Conclusion

Several of the aforementioned sources have called for the continuation of research into feminist theory and performance. Although not mentioned by this study, there is ample feminist theory work covering the history and representation of lesbian/bisexual/queer women and women of color. That is not to say that this study cannot pertain to those groups. Further research in the combination of acting techniques, including an assessment of outside-in approaches, as well as developing work in the area of cognitive science could greatly contribute to existing feminist performance thought. Furthermore, the application of this research and the creation of theatre is of utmost importance, in order to develop, hone, and display feminist thought, even if just to inspire conversation. With application, there is a potentiality for new styles to emerge, altering standard roles, through script analysis or novel performance, that can prove “a woman can succeed within existing models, she is not trapped by them” (Cima 14). Additionally, as society becomes more aware of itself and its inherent patriarchal structure, more plays, television shows, and films will emerge and like Wilde’s *An Ideal Husband* question the gender roles we so often adhere to. As some scholars propose, theatre is truly didactic and influential; therefore the representation of women in entertainment is correlated and crucial to the way women are treated in society. While this study’s aim was to discover what it means to be a feminist performer, and apply that understanding to my direction of male-centric play, a straightforward answer here would be subjective. My research and experimentation of feminist theory in regards to performance allowed me to expand my understanding of the practice of theatre, and contributed to a lasting consciousness that will affect my future work. Therefore, I conclude by resonating the thoughts of those who have come before me: that raising the consciousness of men and women – enriching their understanding of art with history, theory, technique, psychological and biological factors – could carve the path for progressive, enlightened theatre. Wouldn’t that be ideal?

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